Kurchatov V.A.

**Alexey and**

**Mephistopheles**

A psychological, love-drama novel

The author’s edit

**Annotation**

This book is a psychological, tragic love-drama detective story, about faith and its necessity for every ordinary person, about a try to find the answer to the age-old question “What to do?”, which faith and way of life to choose when there is the ingrained prejudice in people’s minds that our peace is controlled by money, that you can buy and sell everything, that the heroes of our time are quite often floozies, gangsters and other “business people”.

**From the author**

Everyone knows the story of Goethe about the encounter of a German, Doctor Faustus and Mephistopheles.

The author has tried to imagine what would happen if Alyosha, a Russian scientist, encountered Mephistopheles nowadays.

I want to perform the result of such speculation to my honoured reader.

To avoid any misunderstandings the author recognises that Mephistopheles and the other characters are the literary characters of Goethe’s book “Faustus” as mentioned above.

Kurchatov V.

**Prologue**

“Who sent for you?” asked God discontentedly at the sight of Mephistopheles. “Do you have nothing better to do or is your conscience beginning to bother you?”

“My conscience isn’t bothering me but I really have nothing to do: people renounce their faith even without my help and they prefer to live according to my laws.

You are the God of good; you believe that good rules the world. What rubbish! Evil is rampant and I am the God of evil.

Good is monotonous and primitive. It limits your commandments. Evil is multi-faceted and sophisticated; it, unlike good, doesn’t have moral constraints. That’s why evil always wins over good. That’s why I am the God of young, healthy people, hungry for gold and power, who are not tricked by pharisaical commandments! My faith is a pledge of their success.

You are the God of old men, women, and invalids! Nobody but those who are wretched lives with your faith. People only give lip service to your commandments, and they really live according to my faith and law. The world is ruled by gold! That’s why I’m the true God in the world and soon I’ll be the one and only!”

“Well, I’ve already heard that once, and you know what happened last time”.

“Do you mean our bet about Doctor Faustus?”

“That’s it. You also said that man is weak, he succumbs to temptation easily and cannot live in accordance with God’s commandments”.

“I won the bet!” Mephistopheles objected with anger. “But my booty, the soul of Faustus, was stolen from under my nose”.

God shook his head.

“How is it not so?” protested Mephistopheles. “Whatever you say Faustus sold his soul and it would have been mine if the angels hadn’t interfered and broken the contract”.

“Alright” God frowned, “As you doubt that you lost, we can have another bet”.

“Excellent!” Mephistopheles said happily. “Let’s make the bet more specific. I insist that people are paltry and that they will forsake their faith and sell their soul for a mere pittance”.

“Alright!” God interrupted. “But I insist that you, with all your power, won’t be able to buy the soul of every person for any old promise. Let’s not waste time and try at least to get the soul of someone you know well”.

With these words he showed Mephistopheles a picture of a person.

“That’s my old friend, Alexey Ivolgin!” Mephistopheles said, surprised. “I’ve got a bone to pick with him.”

“If you think you managed to get the soul of Faustus then try to do the same with Alexey”.

“Easy! How much good does this Russian see in his life? I don’t think he’ll need many promises to make him sell his soul to me”, Mephistopheles exclaimed contemptuously. “I’ll be able to buy the soul of your protégé and I’ll prove that everything can be bought and sold in this world! Gold and I rule the world!

Let’s say that I’ve won the bet when Alexey states: “Moment, you are beautiful! Please, stop!” But the bet should be fair: neither angels nor archangels should dare to interfere with it”.

“I agree”, God nodded. Let Satan be ashamed!”

“We shall see!” Mephistopheles said with a challenge. “I will follow Alexey’s life step by step and I will find something to tempt him. Man is weak and cannot resist my temptations; his soul will cost me no more than the soul of Faustus!”

**Chapter 1**

**A meeting of old acquaintances**

Alexey looked round the flat out of habit; everything was tidy, and everything was in its place. He took a look around the rooms once again, went out of the kitchen, sat down in an armchair opposite the window and began his favorite pastime – watching the sunset.

He had been feeling a bit ill recently so he closed his eyes and gradually began to nod off.

“It’s cold, mum,” Alexey said in a low voice.

“That can be helped”, someone said in a hoarse voice.

Alexey felt warmth, as if from the oven, spreading over his body. He had hardly opened his eyes, when he saw a stranger lounging in the opposite armchair. There was a strong smell of gas in the kitchen. Alexey took a look at the stove and saw that gas was lit.

“Who are you? How did you get in here? Switch off the gas immediately!”

“It’s going to stay on until we agree on something”.

Alexey wanted to stand up and turn the gas off, but some unseen force stopped him. In bewilderment, he perplexedly looked at his uninvited guest. He looked familiar.

“Don’t you recognize me?” the stranger smiled smugly.

Alexey examined his visitor, trying to remember where he could have seen him. Suddenly, he remembered where; when he had been at death’s door, this man had visited him seeking his soul. Alexey recognized him and his guest ordered him to call him Mephistopheles like before. When the question had been posed, to be Alexey or not, Mephistopheles had been left with nothing and had come seeking booty once again.

“I see you aren’t too happy to see your old friend!” said he mockingly. “But I kept my promise and here I’m.

You know, I find it flattering that earlier I was presented to readers as a dandy, fast liver and fighter in the book “The will of count Sheremetiev”. I liked that! In most other cases, people picture me as a miserable old man, some as if I have horns like a goat, and others think I have a pig's snout and that only in your eyes I’m the embodiment of power and evil!

By the way, evil is multi-faceted, and I can be anyone your heart desires, but only if he or she doesn’t have a soul or is full of malice. I can be a luxurious film or sex star if you’d like. Choose what you want”.

“It would be nice if you turned into a mosquito”, Alexey answered sarcastically.

Mephistopheles laughed contemptuously.

“You are a cunning one! I know the fairy-tale about the ogre and the cat. You think that if you kill the mosquito you will destroy me? If you kill it I’ll return in a new form, for example, a boa constrictor that can swallow you like a mouse”.

“So are you like Koschei the immortal?” Alexey said, regretfully.

“How naive people are! He is absolutely nothing compared to me! The comparison offends me! If I weren’t your friend I’d crush you like a worm”.

“I wish you were mortal and I could destroy you”, Alexey said with a sigh.

“You can!” Mephistopheles smiled smugly. “I’m not immortal”.

“I don’t understand then!” Alexey stared at Mephistopheles quizzically.

“There is nothing to understand. It’s all clear”.

“Can you just tell me what you want?” Alexey asked discontentedly.

“There’s nothing else to say. It’s obvious. I am the result of your evil. My power is determined by the amount of evil on the earth: the more evil there is the more powerful and strong I become. Have no doubt – I don’t suffer from ill-health. You see my friend, I’m not immortal but my death will only come when there is no evil left on the earth. As soon as evil disappears, so will I. But don’t hold your breath!”

Mephistopheles sniggered involuntarily when he saw Alexey’s look of wonder.

“Anyway, that’s enough nonsense, say who you want to see before you”.

“It’d be better if you just disappeared!”

“I’ve only just appeared and you’re already trying to get rid of me.” Mephistopheles grinned. “That won't do! We’ve got a lot to talk about. Tell me who I should be.”

“Be yourself”, Alexey responded gloomily.

“Anything for an old friend! But I don’t understand why you use the name of Pierre Ferma instead of your own name. Is it your pen-name?”

“Ferma is a French scientist who is famous for his work in mathematics”.

“It’s clear now: you put the results of Ferma in writing in the form of a story and what you thought about one of the fundamentals definitions of mathematics, didn’t you?”

“I suppose you’re right; but why are you here again? I am not yours yet!”

“I wouldn’t say that!” objected Mephistopheles offhandedly. “I have a business proposition. Last time I was going to take your soul but you escaped. I can’t do the same a second time; that’s why I’m offering for you to sell it to me; I’ll pay any price, ask for anything you like”.

Alexey nodded his head.

“Don’t hurry with the answer, there’s no rush. What do you need your soul for? The worst suffering is that of the pangs of conscience. Sell your soul and there will be nothing to feel pain; your conscience won’t bother you. You’ll have everything, just sell your soul! Think about your life. What’s so good in your life that you don’t want to play with fate? The price isn’t that expensive – your soul will belong to me in any case. It’s just a question of time. But you don’t have much time, only until sunrise. Make a decision! Here is a contract. You just have to sign it and then I’ll do anything you want. You can get any kind of pleasure. Even that which I gave to Doctor Faustus. You know, he didn’t regret that he sold his soul”.

“Not for nothing is it said: beware of Greeks bearing gifts! I know how Faustus made Margarita happy with your help”.

“Everyone chooses their own way”, Mephistopheles said angrily. “I am not to blame for Margarita’s destiny. Faustus condemned himself to such a fate”.

“You only helped him to pick a flower, use it and then crush it underfoot”.

“Let’s stop arguing”, Mephistopheles offered conciliatorily. “It’s as difficult with you as it was easy with Faustus. It’s been well said that Russian’s meat is German’ poison”.

Mephistopheles’ eyes darkened with rage and an unkind light appeared in them. Looking carefully at Alexey he understood that promises and threats wouldn’t get him anywhere, so canny Mephistopheles changed tack. He decided first of all to find out which things would tempt Alexey to sell his soul. Mephistopheles had no doubt about the success of his plan. He strongly believed that everything can be bought and sold; you only have to know how much to offer.

“Alright”, Mephistopheles began to speak ingratiatingly. “Tell me about your life, then”.

“What for?” said Alexey, surprised. “There’s nothing interesting about my life. I’m not a leader, a businessman or a sex-star. Why do you want to know about the destiny of an ordinary person?”

“Would that I knew it”, thought Mephistopheles looking unkindly at Alexey. “I have the distinct feeling that God had his reasons for showing me him”.

But Mephistopheles overpowered his dislike and replied trying to look friendly:

“I want to convince you that faith didn’t let you succeed in life and that you became an unlucky fellow; and when you understand that you’ll lose your faith.”

“I don’t understand why you need to make a scene! The world is your oyster, you know”, said Alexey wearily.

“That’s it! I could force you to accept my desires but I want you to accept my promises of your own volition, to turn your back on your faith and sell your soul to me”.

“I have no desire to do that!”

“You’re not being asked about your desires. Don’t forget who you are dealing with”.

“But that’s going to take a long time and is utterly pointless,” said Alexey, not giving up.

“As far as time goes, we aren’t in a hurry. As for being pointless, that isn’t true. You’re afraid of remembering your life because you’re ashamed of it; and it’s all because of the faith according to which you lived”.

“Nothing of the sort!” Alexey objected quickly.

“If so let’s make a bet: if somewhen you think about your life and say “you are too wonderful! Please, stop!” It will mean that your faith helped you to succeed in life somehow, and I’ll lose the bet. But you should be honest – you must be sincere in your confession. Take into account that you have no choice – if there is even the tiniest of lies, your soul will pass to me immediately”.

“What must happen, will happen”, Alexey agreed unwillingly.

“Now you’re talking!” Mephistopheles said with pleasure. “Ratify our agreement with your signature. I have prepared and signed in advance”.

Alexey laughed.

“Do you devils really have bureaucracy?”

“No! Only people have bureaucracy. We have a slight difference: you have to sign the contract with your blood. Here is a needle. Prick your finger and put the print on the Contract”.

“As you say”, Alexey nodded laughing. “Have it your way! But turn the gas off. What did you turn it on for?”

“Err, no!” Mephistopheles objected with a wry grin. “I was given the condition that I couldn’t make you sign the Contract with threats. Why do you think I turned on the gas? You just put the kettle on the stove, switched on the gas and forgot to light it from absent-mindedness or feeling unwell. But maybe you wanted to commit suicide not having passed God’s tests? When looking at the tap you will always think about the fact that your life is running out as every second ticks by. It will end with the first ray of sunshine! As you can see I have nothing to do with it! Take into account that you’ll commit suicide anyway! You know that this sin is unpardonable; if you commit suicide, you won’t be buried like a human, but like a dog! It will be so if you refuse to sign the Contract!”

“Alright”, Alexey’s answer was indistinct. “What should I begin my story with?”

“From the very beginning; from your childhood memories”.

Alexey closed his eyes and straight away saw the unforgettable pictures of childhood from his distant past.

**Chapter 2**

**Acquaintance with faith**

“Wake up!” Alyosha heard the voice of his grandmother in his sleep. “Time to hit the road”.

Alyosha jumped out of bed like a shot and cringing from the morning cold, quickly put on the clothes he had put out the night before.

A long journey through dusty streets lay ahead.

Alyosha was 6 years old and because of this tired quickly.

“Granny! Let’s take a breather”, he asked pleadingly.

“Alright”, she agreed. “Let’s walk as far as the water pump and take a rest”.

Alyosha happily increased his pace and they soon stopped at the water pump. Alyosha guzzled the cool water and sat on the ground in the shadow of an old birch tree. His Grandmother sat down beside him. The rest lasted for a short time.

“It’s time to go, Alyoshenka! Otherwise we’ll be late”.

Alyosha stood up unwillingly and they continued their walk.

The sun was getting higher and higher so it became harder to walk. At long last the peal of a bell was heard as they approached an old church. His Grandmother crossed herself and bowed low. Her grandson did the same looking at her.

Having taken part in Morning Prayer they returned home in no rush.

“Granny”, Alyosha asked, “What do we go to church for? Can’t we pray at home?”

“Of course, we can but we should go to church. It unites us and brings people together. They become kinder and try to not to live on their own, but together like a big family. If people live in a community and encourage each other in times of trouble it becomes easier and more interesting to live. No enemies are able to subdue such people. It was exactly the reason why enemies could not subdue the kingdom of Rus’ although they were very strong.

“What do you get out of it?” whined Alyosha dolefully, tired from the long walk.

“When I go to church my soul becomes lighter. When I pray I ask God for help to overcome trouble or to give health to my relatives”.

“And does God help?”

“He helps everyone who believes in him”.

“How does he help? Like a magician?”

“No, not like that. I get strength and hope to overcome adversity when I pray.”

“Why doesn’t God spare people from difficulties if he can?”

“Every person has his own destiny and God doesn’t interfere with it. If he did everything for man he would be the same as a puppeteer and people would become puppets”.

Alyosha went quiet trying to understand what his grandmother had said and then asked:

“Grandma, you said that people have a soul. But what is that?”

“When you were baptized, Alyoshenka, you were given a soul. It appeared after your baptism; and a soul is that which makes man different from animals. Yesterday we were at the zoo and saw the monkeys. They have all that man has. It’s only your soul which makes you different to a monkey. Is that clear?”

Alyosha didn’t understand everything but he nodded.

“And what about people who don’t have soul, what are they going to do?”

“Nothing! They will live like monkeys or stray dogs! Only a person who has a soul can address God with a prayer of supplication of forgiveness for bad behavior. A man’s body is mortal, but souls are immortal”.

His granny ruffled Alyosha’s hair tenderly.

“Now you are a child of God. Your soul belongs to God and after death he will define how you lived. If you didn’t live well he won’t take your soul and it will go to a bad place – hell”.

“God picks souls like I do mushrooms?” Alyosha asked, surprised. “I keep some good mushrooms but I throw away rotten ones and toadstools”.

She laughed and nodded.

The sun began to beat down hard. Flies and horseflies began to bother them. But it was easier to walk and talk so Alyosha asked again looking at the cross that was hanging around his neck.

“Grandma, and what’s the cross for?”

“The cross is a reminder that you have a soul. It’s a symbol that there will be difficulties in your destiny. Some have a smaller cross and others a bigger one. Wear your cross with honour however heavy it is.”

“And does our Saviour have a cross?”

“Yes, he does. The Saviour has a cross too but it is the heaviest one because everyone’s sins are upon it”.

“Grandma, but Yurka says that there’s no God and that he’s an invention of priests who make money by cheating ordinary people”.

Grandmother frowned and after a moment answered:

“My little grandson, God exists only for those who believe in him. If Yurka doesn’t believe then God doesn’t exist for him”.

“And what is faith?” Alyosha asked again.

“Faith is that which unites people and doesn’t let them live like a herd. For example, although pigs live together, they are a herd. Only faith differentiates a nation from a herd. Only faith determines what people should consider as good or bad.

As long as we have faith Russia cannot be enslaved; it was before and it will be in the future. All empires fell apart because people didn’t have faith. Our enemies understood it well. It was clear to them that it was impossible to conquer Russia; they didn’t manage to enslave it by way of war until people had faith. That’s the exact reason why they turn against our faith, making people refuse faith in exchange for poor promises and gifts. In this case Russia can become an easy target for enemies, and will fall apart by itself, people without faith will be like a herd and our enemies will trade with them like cattle. But holy Protectrix, the mother of God, won’t turn her back on us and won’t leave her children in trouble and will pardon them for their betrayal. When people come to their senses and turn to their faith again, Russia will rise from the ashes!”

Grandmother’s face was covered with red spots of irritation. She adjusted her headscarf with fidgety movements and having crossed herself three times, bent low to the church in the distance.

“Only faith helped Russians to hold out against insidious and fierce enemies. Only faith helped people to endure suffering and overcome difficulties. Until people have faith the kingdom of Rus’ is unconquerable. And you, my little grandson, don’t turn your back on our faith, don’t betray or disgrace it, and don’t sell your soul!”

Alyosha listened to his grandmother attentively. Then he took his cross off, kissed it and having crossed himself three times put it on back on his neck. His lips whispered automatically and soundlessly:

“I never and will by no means disown my faith!”

**Chapter 3**

**Halcyon days of childhood**

Alyosha liked going to church with grandmother very much. After a short silence he asked again:

“Grandma, where do you know all this from?”

“Where?” she said, surprised. “We were taught a lot”.

A radiant, nostalgic smile lit up her face.

“We lived in a village in a large family, my little grandson. At the head of the family was a very old man. Everyone respected and listened to him. An old woman, the old man’s wife, was a housekeeper: she held the keys for trunks, wardrobes, barns and larders.

Family council was held by senior men. I remember when they need to solve an important problem they took their seats by seniority; the place of honour belonged to the oldest man. The others, women and children, stood behind them”.

“How did you live?”

“Well, my little grandson! We worked a lot and had a tremendous time. The old man kept order. He could not sleep at nights – his old bones ached. That’s why he waited for sunrise. As soon as the first beam of the sun shone from the horizon the old man began to deal out blows with a lash.

“The sun has already risen but you’re still sawing wood! You’re lazy good-for-nothings! I’ll show you, idlers!”

“We worked from sunrise till dawn. Then we went to the edge of the forest to sing songs and dance in a ring. We returned home in the small hours. In the morning we went to work again. But soon my free life ended. An elderly but important person proposed to me from the house of Narishkinih, the princes. He was well educated and corresponded with many scientists of other countries. He was a well-known nobleman; he had dinner with the very Narishkin and his household. The family council decided to get me married. So my new life began. People said about us: he’s rich and famous but I’m beautiful. We had a child, your mother, and life went on in a different way – balls, hussars, card games and receptions. I used to lose so much that I was taken home wearing only a nightgown.

Such life continued for a short period of time. Soon after the revolution your grandfather called me and said:

“Tanya, I’ve decided to give all my wealth, the house, jewelry and money, to the Bolsheviks because sooner or later they’ll take it away and shoot everyone on top of that. Take this box of gold jewelry and my presents, and disown me for my non-proletarian and bourgeois origin. Take our daughter with you and go to the village of your relatives; otherwise you’ll both be exiled to Siberia”.

“That was what I did and they left your grandfather alone. They even praised him for his understanding of revolutionary needs and his desire to leave everything that was taken dishonestly as they said. He was exiled to a village not far from Voronezh”.

“Why didn’t grandfather go abroad, granny? Didn’t he have any friends there?”

“I tried to persuade him but he refused to go.”

“I won’t leave Russia, no way!” he brushed aside my suggestion.

“My land is here, along with my ancestors’ graves. It would be better to be a beggar in my homeland, than a rich man abroad”.

“Granny”, Alyosha asked with interest, “Where did the box of gold disappear to?”

“It saved us from starvation during the war. I used to go to villages and exchange my expensive jewelry for flour. I was given a small sack of flour for every gold ring. I pulled it home. Then I baked buns and sold them to the echelons which drove the soldiers to the front and the injured back. We bought necessities with the money we got. But that was later, grandson. When I disowned my husband and went to where my relatives were, it wasn’t so good there either: they were also dispossessed of everything they had. At that time a good man proposed to me. He was a 1st class engine driver. During the war he drove heavy freight trains with goods, military equipment and munitions to the front and trains with the injured on the way back. Once the furnace bars were damaged by fire on the train. One couldn’t wait for them to get cold: German planes could fly to the train full of injured people and bomb it. Both of his assistants were boys of sixteen years old. He looked at them and spared them. He put on a padded jacket, wadded trousers and a cap. He ordered them to throw water onto the furnace bars and then got into the fire-box to change them. He did it, of course, but he ruined himself too: he burned his lungs with the hot air. He didn’t live long after that. I was left with two daughters. I gave birth to the second girl during my second marriage. It was hard for me, that’s why I went to church with a prayer for help to God. I used to go, pray and ask God for patience and it became easier for my soul; confidence appeared and so I managed to overcome all the difficulties and understood that everything would be fine. So it doesn’t matter if Yurka says that there’s a God or not. The most important thing is that I couldn’t have endured all of my problems and survived without faith.

It became easier when your mother got married”.

“Grandmother, tell me about my grandfather”, Alyosha asked, interested in her memories.

“Alright”, she rejoiced. “The journey seems shorter if we talk. Your grandfather was a good person. May he rest in peace, God rest his soul”.

Grandmother crossed herself and adjusted her headscarf.

“He was a senior forestry officer and had a good country estate in a village not far from Saratov. The family was large but friendly and prosperous. But after the revolution everything turned to ashes. His work became useless and his family split up. It was necessary to live differently, to have an education and a specialty. So when the first remedial school for workers opened grandfather took his high boots off and gave them to his elder son. He hung them around his shoulders and went to the University of Saratov. He walked all the way to Saratov barefoot carrying the boots around his shoulders.

One year later he came back and gave the boots to his younger brother who also went to university. In such a way your father got the boots back. I knew him well before the marriage so I tried to get him to marry your mother many times. But he answered that he wouldn’t do it until he graduated from university and succeeded in life. He made his dream true when he began to work as a teacher of classical mechanics at a technical school. But he wasn’t with your mother for very long, only a few months because of World War Two. He volunteered for the front and after finishing a short officer’s course he was accepted into the shock troops as a troop leader of some machine gunners. He stayed alive only by a miracle: a German sniper just missed his heart, hitting his arm instead. God saved him”.

Grandmother crossed herself again. Looking at her grandson, he did the same.

“Here is our house!” Alyosha screamed happily.

It was quiet and cosy in the house that stood in the middle of the garden. Granny made tea unhurriedly; put a samovar and some tea cups on the table and a jar with sweet-scented honey appeared. At last, fragrant tea was poured into the tea cups and they long drank it with pleasure in silence.

These simple but very dear pictures of his childhood excited Alexey.

**Chapter 4**

**School-days**

“He is filled with feelings! What did he get out of these naïve childhood pictures? What good are they?! But judging from his expression they were happy moments in his life. No, God gave him to me for a reason. What a difference, my charges. Look at women. There were no problems with courtesan. They’re even ready to pick Hell if he has money. But this man is another case – you can’t understand what he needs”.

Having looked once again at Alexey with dislike, Mephistopheles became clear that he had to sit for a long time going through the memories, trying to find the answer to the question: in what case would Alexey sell his soul? Mephistopheles wasn’t going to lose his bet with God, that’s why he forced himself to be more attentive to Alexey’s story.

Alyosha lived well with his grandmother. That was a happy time but it quickly flew by. Now it was time to go to school. He had waited for this moment with impatience. However trouble was not far away: the day before the first of September Alyosha was taken to isolation hospital on suspicion of scarlet fever. He was there for 30 days or more, and then they made him stay at home for 40 days. The teachers advised his parents to take sabbatical leave for one year. They thought he would lag behind at school and stay for another year against his will. Alyosha did not want to be a pupil remaining in the same form for a second year, so after a month of painstaking work he managed to catch up with his classmates to the surprise of the teachers who thought that he had achieved the impossible.

Alyosha was a quiet, shy boy with black eyes that were sad after his recent disease when his mother brought him to school. He appeared in class with great delay. His classmates had already made friends with each other, and because of this they treated the newcomer with suspicion. They treated him like an “ugly duckling”. The teachers did not like him either because of his rebelliousness. Marat, one of the form mistress’s favourites, especially provoked Alyosha. Her love was explained by generous gifts from Marat’s parents. This “naughty boy” at the earliest opportunity spat, kicked or simply hit him. Alyosha could not hit back and protect himself because the offender was “the little dog” of two ringleaders of local lads to whom he gave food. But there was one event that changed Alyosha’s situation. Once in the playground his enemy began to hit him very much expecting the support of his masters. Marat was trying to show how strong he was because he knew that Alyosha could not hit back because of the threat of harsh punishment. His patrons watched this scene in silence. All of a sudden one of them, called Big Ivan, asked Alyosha:

“Why don’t you defend yourself?”

“Then you’ll interfere”, Alyosha lisped, smearing blood on his face, moving his lips with difficulty.

“We won’t interfere”, Ivan answered.

“Good”, Alyosha said with readiness and took his jacket off. But he was very surprised when he saw that his enemy began to whine in a pathetic tone.

“I’m not going to fight him. I don’t want to make contact with him”.

“You will!” Ivan hissed taking him by the scruff of his neck.

“No I won’t!” Marat whimpered.

“Alright,” Ivan said with a sinister look, ‘Alexey, give him a proper bloody nose!’

“I don’t want to,” Alyosha objected.

“What!” Ivan screamed in wonder. “Then I’ll hit you myself!”

“Anyway I won’t hit him until you let go of him”.

But Alyosha’s enemy going mad from fear let out a heart-rending cry.

“Mama! They’re beating me!”

Seeing this turn of events, Ivan gave Marat a thick ear after which he fell head over heels onto the ground.

“Why didn’t you whack him in the face?” Ivan asked reproachfully. “Do you feel sorry for him?”

“No, I don’t. There’s simply little joy in it for me”.

Ivan looked at Alyosha with condemnation but said nothing.

“I see that you’re a rooster,” noted Mephistopheles.

Ivan took Alyosha aside to the water pump, helped him to wash his face and patting his shoulder with approval said:

“You’re a good boy! Come with me tomorrow to somewhere quiet and I’ll teach you how to fight. You’ll go fist fighting with us and if somebody offends you and you can’t hit back tell me about it.”

After that the way local hooligans and scum treated Alyosha changed dramatically. He was treated as a prince of blood. Nobody wanted to deal with Big Ivan.

Next morning Alyosha came to the place. Usually the local scum gathered there who played cards or dominos, whilst others enjoyed throwing knifes at trees. Some adult guys were preparing for fist fights which were the only amusement after work during the first post-war years.

Seeing Alyosha Big Ivan gave him a friendly nod.

“You’ve come. Good boy! I’ll show you one of the techniques that’ll be useful more than once in your life. But first you should remember some precepts.

The first precept of fist fighting is that you should get the better of fear, submit to ache and get through it”.

Alyosha did not know that he would have to use this precept of Big Ivan more than once in his life.

“The second precept is to always stay on your feet. Don’t believe anyone who says don’t kick a man when he’s down. One more important thing: if you’re having a fight spare neither your hair nor your enemy’s hair.

Now, my technique. Kick away your opponent’s legs and simultaneously hit his chin or neck with your fist. Then throw him on the floor. Look at this technique in practice”.

With these words Ivan applied his best technique to Alyosha and the second after he fell flat on the ground.

Alyosha felt pain but tried to seem calm.

“You’re patient!” Ivan praised with pleasure. You won’t be useless. Now let’s train. But don’t spare me otherwise I’ll give you a thick ear. I’m not teaching you for amusement. Be strong in spirit and God will help”.

Alyosha could not help asking:

“What about God’s commandment? You know, it doesn’t allow hitting back?”

Ivan frowned.

“You haven’t understood it correctly. No wonder people say: give a fool enough rope, and he’ll hang himself. This commandment says: if you’re hit on the cheek the point is not to turn the cheek but the fact is no to allow anger and hatred to grip your soul. You need to hit your enemy back and do the same that they did to you. Do you see?”

Alyosha nodded silently.

“In case you didn’t know, on Sunday there’s going to be a fist fight. You will be standing next to me’.

Alyosha remembered his first fight well. Next he went to Ivan in the first row of fighters. He looked at the faces of his opponents and tried to guess who his partner would be.

He was scared; his heart was in his mouth. He wanted to turn around and escape very much. But he could not leave his friends – that was against his faith. To his surprise the battle did not end the way he expected. The fighters did not bother with him, possibly considering him to be a worthless opponent, so he got a weak and feeble boy who was unable to strike Alyosha. Alyosha did not begin to hit him. So they just stood opposite each other. The other participants of the fist fight exchanged several punches idly and sought out stronger and more experienced fighters. Big Ivan was among them. Alyosha watched the fights with a sinking heart and bated breath. The athletes did not spare each other. Their movements were so fast; it was difficult to catch your breath. When one of the opponents fell down the fight stopped. Among the winners was Ivan.

Alyosha ran up to Ivan and full of emotion put his arms round Ivan’s leg and nestled his cheek up to him.

“Oh, come now!” murmured Ivan through swollen lips, deeply touched. “We’re the winners! Why didn’t you fight?”

“I didn’t want to use your best technique on a weaker opponent”, Alyosha answered unwillingly.

Big Ivan looked at him attentively and nodded with approval.

“Help me to get to the water pump and show me the way”.

Unwieldy and heavy Ivan’s body leaned against Alyosha. He became weak at the knees but biting his lip he remained on his feet; supporting Ivan Alyosha led him away to wash.

Despite Alyosha’s changed circumstances in the yard, the other pupils’ still treated him as the “ugly duckling”. It was explained that Alyosha was different to his schoolmates; he was taciturn, shy and sided with his teachers

Having read a book by Alexander Grin called “Scarlet sails” Alyosha built a model schooner with scarlet sails. Being under the impression of the book, this awoke a passion for model-making. He created models of steam-engines, gliders, planes and many others often according to his own design. With the help of one of his classmates he managed to construct a remotely operated model – the exact copy of Belarus, the electricity tractor, which was exhibited at the All-Union exhibition of child and youthful creative work in Moscow.

Alyosha’s imagination helped him in model construction and designing: he could easily think up details of future structures, the structures themselves and models to the point of their appearance and decoration. But his extremely developed imagination led him to fatal circumstances: being under the impression of books Alyosha easily got lost in an imaginary dream-world. His classmates could not understand him and that is why they treated him as if he was not of this world. Even when he impressed them with his fancy pictures they considered him to be arrogant. Such treatment made Alyosha more and more retiring.

Alyosha took great interest in stories about fearless knights. Being impressed by novels about them he liked boys’ knight fights. The usually gloomy expression of Alexey lit up from the thought of them. He imagined the pictures of the distant past to be real. He was standing on the steep bank of a river in the twinkling sunrays wearing armour and defending himself against the enemy surrounding him. His companions-in-arms had already surrendered and scattered. But he continued to show desperate resistance. Having thrown away his shield and put his hands around the handle of the heavy oak sword he was tried to repulse an attack. The enemy, furious about his perseverance, pressed him from all sides calling for him to surrender. But Alyosha bit his lip and continued to fight silently. However, a deadly tiredness adversely affected him and he began to take more and more hits. His armour was still strong; he had put so much effort into it and had had it made according to his own design. Obscuring his eyes with a rose shroud the beads of sweat trickled down from under the liner that had been knitted by his grandmother from a coarse fleece; a drop of blood trickled down his chin from his bitten lip. Alyosha, having used up all his strength, could hardly hold his sword to defend against his enemy’s hits and at last fell from a high cliff onto the river bank and lost consciousness.

Mephistopheles laughed loudly having heard these memories.

“Oh, you, you are the Knight of rueful countenance! And what’s more, you’re offended by me when I call you Don Quixote. However – it would be for nothing. Even Don Quixote wasn’t able to make such a frantic gesture: to fight with the whole horde knowing that he wouldn’t hold out. May I ask why?”

“Those who fall in battle have no shame,” Alexey grinned. “But you can hardly understand that because of your commercialism”.

“That goes without saying!” Mephistopheles nodded. “Such nonsense doesn’t bother my brain”.

At that time destiny brought Alyosha to a nice person, an Art teacher. He looked like Don Quixote: he was as tall and thin as he, and also had moustache like the Knight of rueful countenance. The pupils called this odd fellow Don Quixote.

He differed from others because he thought it pointless to teach amateurs to paint; he told them a lot about painters and their fates. Only Alyosha was fascinated to hear the stories in which other pupils had no interest. Being under the influence of this extraordinary person Alyosha tried to paint. He began with an ordinary chamomile. When a picture was ready he showed it to Don Quixote. He looked at it attentively nodding his head discontentedly.

“Although you don’t paint according to the rules it’s beautiful. Remember, boy – beauty will save the world!”

“Why do I paint incorrectly?” said Alyosha surprisedly. “You say that the flower is beautiful”.

“How to explain a little simpler”, the painter answered dejectedly. I’ll tell you a story, a real one, as people say. Once upon a time there lived a craftsman. His name was Danilka. He was a good master with a God-given talent. He carved flowers out of malachite which a landlord placed in his country estate. They were great but the craftsman didn’t like his works: stone flowers were wonderful but they didn’t look alive and that’s why they couldn’t touch people’s souls. And Danilo-master wanted to create a stone flower that looked alive”.

“What happened in the end?” Alyosha asked impatiently.

“With that”, the old painter answered unwillingly, “he sold his soul to the devil to help him to breathe life into the stone flower. I see, boy, you are on the same path. Stop while it’s not too late otherwise it will lead you to ruin”.

Mephistopheles became animated at the mention of the devil and stared at Alexey – was it his Achille’s heel?

Alyosha did not listen to the old painter. He spent many sleepless nights with pictures trying with the obstinacy of a fanatic to draw a flower that looked alive. Alyosha dreamt that if he grasped the power of colours he would be able to paint pictures in order to touch people’s souls.

Alyosha’s female-friends accepted their portraits and pictures of flowers with admiration but they could not or did not want to understand his fanatical aspiration. Alyosha’s stories about beauty that would save the world did not interest them and that is why they preferred his more practical acquaintances. This intensified Alyosha’s loneliness.

The desire to grasp the power of the colours left a mark on him – Alyosha learned to see and deeply feel the beauty of the outside world. He equally liked fragrant gardens and flowery meadows, and admired the beauty of a blade of grass as well as the petals of a rose. The main thing was he began to perceive nature as alive. For him the ground was alive; and the words ‘mother earth’ were not just a sound. He accepted the trees, the grass in the meadows and even every blade of grass as a living thing. Finally, the prediction of the old painter came true – his path led him to tragedy.

The most surprising thing was that Alexey did not think it an unwise path to choose. It did not matter. One thing was clear: Alexey chose this way notwithstanding the fact that it could bring him to grief and was not going to choose direction, although he clearly understood he would be an “ugly duckling” all his life.

“Even I, the Devil, don’t understand this sort of people; and to all appearances it will be difficult to win the bet. Alright, I have an ace up my sleeve that I haven’t played yet. Let’s wait and see for the time being what other memories my ward has”, Mephistopheles thought, looking at Alexey with irritation.

Alyosha remembered his first lesson of treachery. Once Edik, his friend, had offered to go to the refuse dump from an aircraft manufacturing plant in order to convince him that there was much material available for crafting.

“If you don’t go there”, persuaded his friend, “you’ll be without the clippings of duralumin needed for the construction of the cruiser model, and you won’t be able to participate in the town’s exhibition of model ship.” Alyosha wanted to take part in it, that is why after many attempts to persuasion him he agreed to keep his friend company. They had to go by tram out of town. The dump was between two stops and Edik, in order to reduce the journey, decided to jump out of the tram halfway. Alyosha vainly asked him to wait for the stop as he had never done this before and was afraid of falling. But Edik brushed him aside and jumped out at the turning when the tram reduced its speed. Alyosha had to jump out at full. Only by a sheer luck did he keep his balance and was not knocked down by the car following the tram.

This incident shook Alyosha up – he could not understand Edik who did not want to make a slight concession although he knew full well that Alyosha could have bruised himself badly. His friend’s attitude to him and his life shocked him. He said nothing to Edik, not a word of judgment or reproach; he just cut him out of his life.

“Your friend didn’t remember that you often helped him out when he was in need without considering yourself. Now it’s time to learn my lesson: those who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. I think this lesson didn’t benefit you at all. Only the grave can straighten a hunchback. How many times have you had to pay for your unwillingness to follow my principles”, Mephistopheles grumbled contemptuously.

Alexey did not answer and tried to get rid of sad memories.

School years flew by in a moment and there Alyosha was at senior school.

At the beginning of the academic year a new pupil appeared called Ravil Saev. Alyosha was not interested in where he came from and what kind of person he was but he ought to have.

The favorite pastime of Ravil was the humiliation and harassment of classmates. Nobody dared to stand up to him. He decided to bully Alyosha too. Once, during a geography lesson there were being showed lantern-slides. Alyosha was looking at them with great interest. Ravil seized his chance when the teacher left the class he stood in front of Alyosha blocking his view of the screen. Alyosha moved to the side, but Ravil blocked it again. This continued until Alyosha’s patience ran out.

“You are the limit! What do you want?”

In response, Ravil all of a sudden, head-butted him in the face, smashing his lips and nose, and that was the moment when Ivan’s lessons proved to be useful. Like at a workout Alyosha applied a technique and a split second later, his opponent was lying on the floor. Thinking that Alyosha might begin to kick him as he did himself he put his arms over his head.

“I gave you a thick ear and you fell straight away but never kick a man when he’s down”, Alyosha lisped, hardly moving his broken lips, looking at Ravil contemptuously at his feet.

Understanding that nobody was going to hit him Ravil jumped up hand over fist and disappeared through the door issuing threats. In the corridor he hissed to a group of pupils that he was going to punish Alyosha soon. When Ravil escaped Aluosha’s friend came up to him.

“How did you dare touch him! Run home immediately. He’s going to bring his gang with him and they’ll beat you black and blue. Murder means nothing to them!”

But Alyosha, after some short consideration decided that to run away would be a disgrace. That is why he stayed at school until lessons had finished.

Alyosha might have come to a bad end were it not for the girls from his class. They knew that Ravil was a member of an inner-city gang that is why just after the fight they ran to the director of studies. Getting scared he immediately summoned Alyosha’a parents and told a district police officer about what had happened who acted quickly and effectively. The next day he summoned Alyosha and his opponent to the director’s office.

“The fact you had a fight at school and in a lesson is worthy of harsh punishment. When you spelled things out to each other we didn’t interfere. But when you, Ravil, were given a rebuff you want to get your mates to punish Alexey. Alright, you can call them but then I’ll call my mates to help Alexey and two can play that game. It’s better for you to shake hands with each other and consider that the incident is over. This must not happen again!”

Soon after these events a young man clothed like a dandy came up to Alexey in the street.

“Hello, general!” he called to him from a distance.

“Why general?”

“According to our principles if you can stand up to the the participants of a gang and then become reconciled with them then you are treated like a general”.

“I haven’t heard of that”, Alyosha said distrustfully. “And who are you?”

“My name is Boris. I’m one of Ravil’s friends”.

“Where is he? I haven’t seen him for a long time”.

“He fell a bit ill”, Boris answered unwillingly. “Ravil badly distinguished himself in his fight with you. Nobody respects the weak that’s why we had to punish him”.

“What for?” Alyosha asked.

“Because he behaved like a cowardly dog. People are divided into wolves and rams, into those who eat and those who are eaten”.

“And what about the dogs you mentioned?” Alyosha knitted his brow showing that he did not like the principles of his new acquaintance.

“Those who are like dogs should be the servants of wolves and only take some bones after the wolves have eaten”, Boris grinned.

“And who do I rank among?” Alyosha asked sarcastically.

“Among wolves!” Boris answered stiffly as though he had not noticed the sarcasm. “That’s why your place is with us’.

“Why a wolf?”

“Only a wolf would dare to attack a pack of dogs knowing that they could be bitten to death”.

“Boris is right!” Mephistopheles assented. “You are a wolf! And you should be with me. Admit the purposelessness of your faith and the faith of the weak and losers and accept mine, the faith of the healthy, strong, and free. My faith is a pledge of success in life!”

“I don’t want to be neither wolf nor ram. I’m not going to eat anybody and don’t want to be eaten myself”.

“But that’s not possible!” Boris exclaimed with irritation. “You should choose –are you with us or not?”

“Were I to be with you, I’d have to live off somebody else and that’s not for me”. Moreover one has to pay for everything in one’s life”.

“You’re right!” Boris agreed. “But I will tell you a parable.

Once a raven and an eagle met.

“Look, friend,” the raven said to the eagle. “You’re so big but live a short life and although I’m small, I live a hundred years”.

“Don’t forget”, the eagle answered proudly, “I live by hunting but you eat carrion”.

“Of course, a day of reckoning will come but I’m going to live to my heart's content even for a short period of time. In order to always have enough money because where money is, so, too are girls and wine!”

“I’m not interested in girls who be bought. Chic clothes don’t attract me either. I’d look like a rooster in then. With regards to expensive restaurants I don’t suffer from gluttony. That’s why I don’t need what you’re offering me. I’m not going to live off others. I’m not scared of work and I can always earn living”.

“You’re useless”, Boris said gloomily, “you’ll never succeed in life”.

“He was right”, Mephistopheles joined in the conversation, “By the way I don’t understand your intention to be neither wolf nor sheep. Who you’re going to be if everyone is divided into those who eat and those who are eaten. A third isn’t given in our life! But let’s see how you managed to live being neither wolf nor ram”.

“Simple”, Alexey grinned, “it’s enough to not eat others and to not let others eat you”.

There had been long discussion in the teacher's common room about the fact that Alyosha had dared to stand up to the gang of hooligans.

“Being alone with the gang of hooligans and knowing that you aren’t able to overcome them is real madness”, Mephistopheles noticed with didactic tone. “I think a case such as this wasn’t the last in your life”.

“I didn’t want to grovel”.

“These are empty words that only clog your brain”, Mephistopheles objected.

“I know such principles: if someone is going to rape you one shouldn’t resist but bend one’s back acceptingly. That’s not for me”.

“Exactly”, Mephistopheles grumbled, “You aren’t particularly clever”.

“You know”, Alexey brightened up turning a deaf ear to Mephistopheles’s remark, “many years passed and one day when I was strolling around the streets of a spring town when an unshaven fellow with restless eyes came up to me.

“Don’t you remember me?” the stranger asked in a woolly voice.

“No, I don’t”.

“I’m your classmate!”

Seeing the tramp Alexey could hardly recognized one of his old school enemies.

“Look, be so kind, give me some money for bread! I want to chew something but I have nothing in my pocket!”

“I felt sorry for him and gave him everything I had with me. The most surprising thing was that many years later this “friend” met me by accident in a park and began to thank me”.

“You know, I owe you for that five thousand banknote you gave to me. I was able to live on it for the whole week. It turned my life around. I gave up drinking and my life got better little by little. Now I’m alright. I won’t forget that you didn’t remind me of malice and hold me over the edge of a precipice”.

“And what made you happy?” Mephistopheles sniffed scornfully. “You needed to push him in to a hole. But you saved him”.

“I simply helped an indigent”, Alexey answered discontentedly.

“Let’s not quarrel. You know the principle of Tolstoy that non-resistance to evil by violence isn’t for me. Have you always behaved like a knight?” Mephistopheles asked with a jeer.

“No, I haven’t”, Alexey objected with bitterness. “I haven’t always managed to deal with rascals. Good seldom defeats evil”.

“It’s really true!” Mephistopheles exclaimed.

“At school I liked my classmate – Alya Belova. I only liked her because she looked like a doll. Everybody thought that I was in love with her. She didn’t pay attention to me and was enamoured with my classmate, Yuri Davlenko, who was well-fed and smooth like a girl. My “fame” after my “heroic” deed in the fight with Ravil, the utter hooligan, didn’t gave Yuri rest and he, the idol of all the girls at school, strongly envied me.

So, once a Young Pioneer leader came to our class and everybody crowded around her. I was standing behind Alya. Davlenko put his finger in his mouth and pushed aside Alya’s splendid plait he and passed his wet finger over her neck thinking that Alya might think that it was me.

“Oh, you are a scumbag!” I hissed darkly. “Well, look out!”

The others didn’t understanding what the matter was and stared at us puzzled.

“What happened?” the Young Pioneer leader asked alarmed.

“I don’t know what Alyosha wants”, Davlenko answered with an air of innocence. “Let’s take this outside”.

“I looked at him with hatred. I’d give him a thick ear with pleasure. But what I could use as an excuse, you know I didn’t manage to prove Davlenko’s boorishness. Nevertheless, no doubt I would have hit his satisfied face if I hadn’t already had a fight with Ravil. I wouldn’t be get away with two fights at school. Davlenko expected exactly the same in provoking me.

This act of my classmate was my first lesson in meanness and its impunity; that left its mark on my soul”.

“It’s not a reason to be upset”, Mephistopheles said condescendingly.

“I suppose you had a lot of lessons of meanness like that. Could you repay a debt to many people? If you came to your senses and accepted my faith you wouldn’t have such problems”.

“I choose my own way and I go where that takes me”.

“It’s surprising. You chose such a path not by prompting or by stupidity but by your own choice. Why did you make that choice?”

Alexey did not answer. He remembered an episode from his school life that had determined his destiny.

“I read an adventure novel out of habit at one of my form tutor’s maths lessons. I just got to the best bit when the teacher came up to me and asked:

“Why are you doing unauthorized things in my lesson?”

“Who needs your Maths? I exclaimed depreciatingly, “A” and “B” don’t stand for anything. It’s useless!”

The Maths teacher considered that such behavior undermined her authority and is acted quickly and determinedly. She went to the director of studies who was a weak-willed and unscrupulous person and whose aim was to uphold his authority at the expense of the pupils.

“If a pupil is afraid of his teacher”, Mariya Alexeevna often liked to say, “It means he respects him”.

“So this worthy man i.e. the director of studies, summoned me to the director's office”.

“Go immediately for your mother and don’t come back without her!” he ordered.

“Why mother? She’s ill. It’s better to call for my father”.

“What! You dare to lecture me? How dare you question my orders?” he screamed madly and sent one of the female pupils to call for my mother.

“When during the lesson I was summoned to the director of studies, having come to the office I saw my crying mother. I stood next to her while both the director of studies and Mariya Alexeevna accused my mother of not keeping her son under control. They told her lots of things: I was accused of hooliganism, individualism, free-thinking, and disrespect of teachers etc. In a word, as they say, I had all the vices. In the end they said they were going to discuss my act at the teachers’ council and it would make the decision to exclude me from school.

But things didn’t turn out like that. After her passionate speech about my awful behaviour, all of a sudden, a young History teacher who had recently been taken on said:

“Alyosha is the only pupil out of all the 10th graders who is good at History”, she said hastily.

Mariya Alexeevna looked at her angrily and was about to turn on her when Merkin, a Chemistry teacher and hero of the Soviet Union, stood up:

“Colleagues”, he began insinuatingly, “I find nothing offensive in Alyosha’s words to Mariya Alexeevna. They’re only evidence of the fact that Mariya Alexeevna treats her lessons formally – she doesn’t give the pupils the opportunity to solve practical tasks with the help of Mathematics. I think we can consider Alyosha’s remark as the need to discuss such questions at one of the teachers’ council meetings. As far as Alexey is concerned I suppose we should offer our respected Mariya Alexeevna a chance to try and convince pupils to treat Mathematics with respect and arouse their interest in this subject.”

“The teachers’ council accepted Markin’s offer despite all Mariya Alexeevna’s objections and strong displeasure.

Mariya Alexeevna perceived the teachers’ council’s decision as the final undermining of her authority and hated me with her whole heart. In my final Maths exam I got an A.

When I graduated from school I was blacklisted. They wrote all about my individualism, free-thinking and disrespect of teachers etc.

“With such a report I wouldn’t be accepted in a prison colony let alone university!” I said to the head master indignantly.

This conversation was overheard by an Art teacher, Klenov V., who was sitting in the head master’s office at that time.

“Give me your report,” he asked, and having read it attentively, told the head master that it was written incorrectly and needed to be rewritten.

“We can’t!” the head master objected stiffly. “It was written by the form-master and we can’t change it”.

“We’ll see”, Klenov grinned.

He quickly rewrote the report, signed it as a party organizer and, having asked Merkin to sign it as a trade union leader, gave it to the head master.

“I’m not going to approve this report. We’re breaking the law. Mariya Alexeevna will complain”.

“Alright”, said Klenov calmly, “Then we’ll pose this question to the Party Committee. We ought to talk about unsatisfactory educational work with pupils. If Alexey’s report is correct it is evidence of that”.

After such an argument from the secretary of party organization the head master had to sign the report.

“The most surprising thing is that after I graduated from school I was one of the three senior classes who entered university and Mariya Alexeevna boasted to all her acquaintances:

“You know my pupil got into university. He’s going to study Physics and Maths!”

“My happy childhood and unforgettable school years quickly passed and with my prom they finished. It was necessary to answer the question “What next?” I remembered a conversation shortly before the prom with my Art teacher who had led me to a crossroads.

“Look, Alexey, I’ve heard you’re going to enter university? he said, “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.

If you graduate from university and then from a postgraduate course, you’ll become a highly-educated but unappreciated person with a low salary.

If you go to work in a factory you’ll be less educated but be respected and highly-paid. You have a clear mind and clever fingers, that’s why in that occupation you’d quickly achieve status and recognition”.

“But you chose the first way. What for? Can you explain?”

“What for?”

“I want to be able to understand the essence of your soul. You’re not an idiot or a fool, but you chose the path that wouldn’t lead you to success. You clearly understood that your faith and your chosen path would ensure that you stayed an “ugly duckling” for the rest of your life. Nevertheless, you didn’t forsake your faith and didn’t change your pathway. Why?”

“I wanted to do it that way”.

“You’re trying to get out”, said Mephistopheles discontentedly, “Your answer only works for half-wits”.

“Alright, here is another explanation – everyone chooses his own way and faith”.

“It’s all clear without you”, Mephistopheles knitted his brow. “I still don’t understand the reasoning behind such a decision. Oh, very well, it isn’t sunrise yet. I understand”.

Alexey grinned.

“Choosing my way wasn’t easy for me. But I wanted to do something else very much – to become the leader of a hobby group called “clever hands” and devote my life to the construction of schooners with scarlet sails”.

“That wouldn’t be bad!” laughed Mephistopheles, “You could have been happy, clean shaven and having a bit to drink! If you’d chosen that, then I wouldn’t have been sitting here now racking my brains with your problems!”

“Everybody’s different”, said Alexey.

“You bet!” said Mephistopheles, waving his hands. “There’s only one difference – most people choose one way but others, like you, fanatically insist on doing the opposite.